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THE UNIVERSITY OF ALBERTA

NORA AT DAYBREAK

by

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A THESIS

SUBMITTED TO THE FACULTY OF GRADUATE STUDIES AND RESEARCH
IN PARTIAL FULFILMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE
OF MASTER OF FINE ARTS

IN

PLAYWRITING

DEPARTMENT OF DRAMA

EDMONTON, ALBERTA

FALL, 1983

ABSTRACT

Nora at Daybreak is a play about lost chances and unfulfilled dreams. It also deals with family love and responsibility in the relationship of John to his sister, Eve, and his nephew, Boxer. John has reached a turning point in his life. He has lost his job and his wife in quick succession and has few regrets about either one. He plans to buy an airplane in order to rekindle his World War II flying aspirations, and he has decided to sell the family house to support this scheme. The central image of the play, however, is the wood sculpture John is building in his backyard. As the sculpture takes shape, so do the tensions and conflicts in the play. The more absorbed John becomes with building his monument, the more his family forces him to affect their lives. Eve resists his flying plans and is opposed to the sale of the family home. She tries all the conventional means of stopping John, with little success. She is forced to reveal some of her own lost dreams in an attempt to drag John back to the present. Boxer is not only entirely supportive of John's plans but demands support and a blessing for his own dream of going to art school. While longing for a different future, John is haunted by the past. He sees Boxer as himself in the dim shadows of the memory scenes, and recalls the days when he was at the threshold of realizing his own dreams. John must face the responsibility of Boxer's worship and Eve's love. He "fails" Boxer by forcing him to make his own decision. He fails

Eve when he does acknowledge her love for him. Finally, he must acknowledge his own limitations and possibilities, accept the lost chances, and salvage the love and respect of his family.

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McKinlay, Gordon Macdonald, Eve Barry, Keltie Stearman.

DEDICATION

For Ed and Vi and Uncle Roy.

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N O R A A T D A Y B R E A K

Conni L. Massing
#212, 10147-108 Street
Edmonton, Alberta
January 1, 1983

CAST OF CHARACTERS

JOHN MORGAN.....59 years old.

EVE DENNISON.....57 years old. JOHN's sister.

BOXER DENNISON.....20 years old. EVE's son.

YOUNG JOHN.....17-24 years old. This part is
played by actor playing role of
BOXER.

YOUNG EVE.....15-22 years old.

SETTING.....John Morgan's backyard.

TIME.....Act One: October 31, 1980.

Act Two: November 11, 1980.

ACT ONE

The action takes place in JOHN MORGAN's backyard. The space is dominated by his work area where there is a good deal of old, gnarled dead birch in various stages of preparation. There are many tools spread about the area and a large messy stack of provisions: pop cans, empty and full, cups, bottles, paper, newspapers, blankets and an ice bucket. There are also several stumps large enough to sit on and a work bench. There are also the usual trappings of a backyard, wheelbarrow and perhaps an old wicker garden seat. The boundaries of the space may be delineated by the remains of a picket fence and, upstage, two or three large trees. There is no need for greenery on the set as the action takes place in late fall. EVE and BOXER enter from a well-worn path downstage of JOHN's work area. There is also an upstage entrance, from around the side of the house. The house is not represented on stage. The memory scenes take place around the backyard, with the only restriction being that they do not infringe upon JOHN's work area. The play begins with a memory scene, observed by JOHN.

The sound of big band jazz drifts into JOHN's work area. JOHN stops to listen as lights fade up slowly on memory area.

YOUNG EVE is alone in the memory area. She is humming to herself and dancing, arms up and hands placed on the shoulders of an imaginary dance partner. She tries the step two or three times and then breaks into the song while continuing to practice the step. YOUNG JOHN enters. He watches YOUNG EVE, smiling. She doesn't notice him. There is a carafe of wine and two glasses beside EVE. JOHN bursts into enthusiastic applause.

YOUNG JOHN (imitating a radio announcer)
 Yes folks...the inimitable vocal styling of Eve Morgan. And now
 she's going to favour us with another number from the same album...
 Old Rugged Cross.

YOUNG EVE (laughing)
 Are you sure you don't want to hear something just a little more
 upbeat?

YOUNG JOHN
 What did you have in mind?

YOUNG EVE
 Chateau Morgan...1938...

(YOUNG EVE points to the wine.)

YOUNG JOHN
 How did you get that past Mom?

YOUNG EVE
 She went out.

YOUNG JOHN
 I didn't know you knew any drinking songs, Eve.

YOUNG EVE
 It's for a toast, idiot. I had a singing lesson today and Mr.
 Bessel said I was magnificent.

YOUNG JOHN
 If we had a drink every time that happened we'd be...

YOUNG EVE
 He said he'd find me a teacher in the city. We're set.

YOUNG JOHN
You're set...

YOUNG EVE
 Well I don't want to spend another winter here. Let's go now.
 We'll make it a New Year's resolution to be famous.

YOUNG JOHN
 Whoa...aren't you going to finish school first?

YOUNG EVE
 What for? You're the one with the "head on your shoulders". I'm
 just terribly talented.

YOUNG JOHN

Now hold it...

YOUNG EVE

I peeked at the painting. It's lovely.

YOUNG JOHN

It's not finished yet.

YOUNG EVE

That's alright. We can still celebrate. To your success and my brilliance.

(YOUNG EVE pours the wine and hands
YOUNG JOHN a glass. They lift their
glasses in the toast.)

YOUNG JOHN

Wait, stick your finger in my drink.

YOUNG EVE

What?

YOUNG JOHN

Dip your finger in my wine. I do the same. Then we drink.

YOUNG EVE

Is this like signing in blood?

YOUNG JOHN

Yes. Now it's an omen as well as a toast. Link arms.

(YOUNG JOHN and YOUNG EVE link
arms. There is a brief uncomfort-
able moment.)

YOUNG EVE

To the future. A fast train and a big city.

(The two bow their heads to drink
as the noise of a radio news broad-
cast fades into the scene. YOUNG
JOHN breaks away from the toast.

YOUNG EVE

What's the matter?

YOUNG JOHN

News is on.

YOUNG EVE

What about the toast, John? And the omen?

YOUNG JOHN

There's going to be a war.

YOUNG EVE

There's going to be a war. And I'm going to sing in New York... and you're...

YOUNG JOHN

I mean it, Eve.

YOUNG EVE (hurt)

I meant it too.

YOUNG JOHN

Shhhh...

(YOUNG EVE exits after a moment, singly loudly.)

(Lights brighten on JOHN, who is standing in his work area watching the memory scene. He hums distractedly, a few notes from the song YOUNG EVE has been singing and then catches himself, stops. He begins, rather determined, to sing his own song as if to drive out the echoes of EVE's song.)

JOHN (singing)

Ada Riley...had a...wart!

Ada Riley...was that sort of girl...

(JOHN continues to whistle the tune he has been singing and turns to his work. He picks a piece of wood, looks at it long and hard and begins to chip and smooth the bark. He speaks -- half to himself and half to the wood.)

Nothing short of a rescue, I hope you realize.

(Pause. Rummages through his pile of provisions for a tool. Continues working.)

JOHN

You could have had a sad or humiliating end at the hands of someone more practical than myself.

(Singing.)

I think that I shall never see...

(Stops. Chuckles. Regards the piece of wood with something close to affection.)

Could have been a church pew...yes...a sinner's hot plate. Or a cutting board or a garage or a kitchen chair. Firewood.

(Pause.)

Or a bunch of goddamn popsicle sticks.

(Sings.)

I think that I shall never see...Ada Riley's wart.

(Pause.)

Clean and grey and dead. Leaves gone off to your children's children. Does that make you a grandfather or does that make you a dead tree?

(Chuckles to himself.)

Never you mind. Maybe you'll be reincarnated as a perennial... a rose bush. On the other hand you might end up as a sweet potatoe.

(Continues working for a few moments.)

Maybe I'll be recycled too. You and me...we'll get ourselves recycled.

EVE (offstage)

John! John, you out here?

(JOHN smiles to himself, grabs a piece of the wood and slumps down among his pile of provisions. He picks an empty rye bottle out of the pile and throws it into view. He then proceeds to do an imitation of a very sentimental old drunk.)

JOHN

He was soaring above the clouds like a silver bird when they got him captain...

(EVE has entered and she stops and watches, horrified.)

They shot him out of the sky and he went down like a shooting star... all sparks and flames...Nothing left but a burnt spot on the grass.

(A heart-rending sob.)

That and the memory of his laughing eyes. Such laughing eyes he had, captain...Like my sister Eve.

(EVE is suspicious now.)

EVE

John...

JOHN

And such laughing legs.

EVE

I think you're pulling one of my laughing legs.

JOHN

Great bleeding Jesus! It's Ada Riley.

EVE (laughing)

Now, you're not that far gone.

JOHN

Oh, good morning, Eve.

EVE

All that for my benefit?

JOHN

Come now. Don't you know a flashback when you see one?

EVE

Well I guess I'll know for next time. What are you doing up to this time of the morning?

JOHN (gravely)

Vespers.

EVE

Vespers.

JOHN

And you?

EVE

Oh, I couldn't sleep. They're tearing up that road back of the house again. I don't know why they bother...no one ever uses it but the kids on their bikes.

JOHN

Well now, I imagine they're doing it because they know it annoys you.

EVE

Wouldn't surprise me. I might have been able to put up with that but then I discovered your "handiwork". Are you going to explain... or are you...

JOHN

You want a drink? Bacon and eggs? Coffee? Or do you want me to lead you in prayer?

EVE

I'll have a chair if you've got one.

(JOHN finds a suitable piece of wood for EVE.)

JOHN

So did you get all your guests tucked in and fed up? 'Course I don't know if Harold's ever fed up. Lord, that man can pack it away.

EVE

What would you call those little pictures you drew, John? Caricatures? Comic strips? Honestly, you'd think you were nine years old. Waiting till everybody's gone to bed and then tacking mean little pictures to their doors. And to make matters worse you tacked Alice's picture to Harold's door. Why did you have to draw them with such big noses?

JOHN

Because they have big noses. Are you giving them breakfast too or did they leave mad?

EVE

I already took the cartoons down and yes I'm giving them breakfast.

JOHN

Why did you do it, Eve?

EVE

I didn't want to have to explain the silly things. I kept them if that's what you're worried about.

JOHN

No, Eve. Why'd you put out the red alert for all the relatives? Guess I know why. Guess they wanted to have a look at me to see if I've grown fangs since Joyce left.

EVE

That is not why...

JOHN

It was wonderful pot roast but you shouldn't have gone to the trouble. We could have set up some telephone interviews or a chain-letter.

EVE

It was your choice to be the centre of attention! I had that dinner planned weeks ago! After you lost your job and before you lost your wife if you want to know exactly.

JOHN

I don't believe you.

EVE

You believe it.

JOHN (after a pause)

Pretty high turn-out for a pot roast.

EVE

Maybe it was the pie, then. Did it ever occur to you that they wanted to see you because they care?

JOHN

I guess curiosity is the better part of concern.

(Pause.)

But that still doesn't explain why you're over here when you should be busy roasting a pig for Harold. You shouldn't be curious. Christ, I've seen more of you in the last three weeks than I have in 20 years.

EVE

I'll have that drink now.

JOHN

Now, Eve. You don't really want...

EVE

How would you know what I really want? And I might have meant almost anything...juice, coffee...

JOHN

Will a rye do you?

EVE

Yes.

(JOHN digs through his pile of supplies and retrieves a glass and a mickey of rye whiskey. He pours a drink for EVE. JOHN turns to his work. EVE takes a sip as if to steady herself and nearly chokes in the process.)

I overheard your conversation with Harold last night.

JOHN

Cousin Harold should be overlooked, not overheard.

EVE

I heard you tell him that you were going to sell the house.

JOHN (considering a piece of wood)

Hmmmm...

EVE

John! Why did you tell him that?

JOHN

He offered me a job between bites of pie last night...

EVE

What did you say?

JOHN

Told him I didn't know if I could manage the responsibility of being a shipping clerk. And then I told him that it would be a while before I'd have to come begging because I was planning on selling the house.

EVE
And are you?

JOHN
Yep.

EVE (after a pause)
Do you have any gingerale?

JOHN
Are you sure you don't want breakfast?

EVE
Why should I want breakfast? I haven't been to sleep either.

JOHN
Do you mind if it's warm?

(EVE shakes her head. JOHN throws her a can of gingerale.)

EVE
I've been up all night worrying about this house business.

JOHN
Nothing to worry about...

EVE
I grew up in this house too, John. And I think it's pretty...
damned ridiculous if you're going to sell it just because you don't
want to be beholdin' to Harold...or to anyone else.

JOHN
Have to admit you've got my attention. I can't remember when I
last heard you damn anyone or anything...

EVE
Maybe you just weren't listening...

JOHN
And "beholding". Another rare, dirty word.

EVE
Don't you mock me, John.

JOHN
Alright, Eve. Why don't we start again?

(Pause.)

JOHN
I'm selling the house.

EVE
Then I'm buying it.

JOHN
You can't afford it.

EVE
George's life insurance is just sitting in the bank.

JOHN
Eve, Eve...no. I need the money for...a special project which I'm pretty sure you don't want to finance.

EVE
I'll buy the house and you can stay with Boxer and me. It'll save us wearing out a path between the two places.

JOHN
No, Eve.

EVE
Or we could all move into this house. I've never liked that old barn I'm in anyway.

(JOHN turns abruptly and cuts himself with the knife he's been working with.)

JOHN
Don't get carried away, Eve. You don't even know what I want the money for.

EVE
You've cut yourself.

(EVE pulls a handkerchief out of her pocket and approaches JOHN. She begins to dab at his finger.)

JOHN
No blood before breakfast, hey?

EVE (uneasily)
Hold still.

(JOHN pulls away from her.)

JOHN

Here, I'll put my finger in your drink, disinfect the cut.

(JOHN dips his finger in EVE's drink.)

Now you have to take a drink...as a sign of trust.

(EVE looks at JOHN, smiles uncertainly and raises the glass to her lips. JOHN quickly takes the glass away from her, dumps the contents.)

It's not fair unless you know what you're agreeing to. I'm selling the house because I need the money. I need the money because I'm taking up flying again.

(Long pause.)

EVE

You...are doing what?

JOHN

It's almost cheaper to buy a plane these days than it is to rent one. Either way, it's going to cost me a pile. Then, of course, I'll need some notebooks, some manuals and maybe a crash helmet.

(Pause. He chuckles.)

I figure the house ought to bring in about sixty thousand or more. Place is starting to get to me anyway. It's like walking around in an old silent movie. The floor squeaks and sings like I'm walking on graves. And I keep having these damn dreams...

EVE

I try to mind my own business, John. I have been trying to watch and not say anything. You have been whittling away out here for how long? Almost two weeks. Dragging dead wood into the yard. Chipping, carving, drawing pictures of the wood. Drawing pictures of your family. Staying up nights bent over old logs. And now you tell me you're going to fly.

JOHN

I have to do this, Eve. But I want to fly.

EVE

If you think I'm going to let you sell the house for some crazy scheme that you're never going to carry out anyway...

JOHN

I had a talk with Ernie that works out at the airport. I talked to him yesterday.

EVE

I don't believe you.

JOHN (fiercely)

You believe it!

BOXER (offstage)

John! You out here?

JOHN

Round the back, Boxer!

(BOXER runs in, carrying a big bag.)

BOXER

Morning, John. Hi, Mom. What are you doing over here, anyway?

JOHN

The county sent in some earthmovers to wake her up.

BOXER

Yeah? I never heard anything. You better get back there. Harold's making noise about breakfast and Alice doesn't know how to work the coffee-maker. Vera's looking through all your cupboards...

EVE

Alright, Boxer. I get the idea.

BOXER

I saw the drawings last night when I got home. That one of Harold was great. It looked like he was storing all his pie in his cheeks. Did you take them down, Mom? No one said anything about it this morning.

EVE

And no one's going to either.

BOXER

Okay, I get the idea. Anyway, here's the costume. Can't wait to see you in this get-up, John.

JOHN

Costume?

EVE

Don't play dumb, John. The Hallowe'en dance at the Elks club.

JOHN

So?

EVE

John, you promised you'd come.

BOXER

Are you really going to sell the house, John?

EVE (exasperated)

Enough already, Boxer. You've brought the costume, now why don't you get back to the house and guard the kitchen?

BOXER

Yes ma'am.

EVE

And I'll see you at lunch.

JOHN

I'll see you after lunch!

BOXER

Shhh, now. The backyard has ears.

(BOXER exits, laughing.)

EVE

Why do I always feel like there's some kind of conspiracy going on between you two?

JOHN

Come by after lunch and we'll teach you the handshake.

EVE

Maybe he finds you easier to talk to because you've never given him a spanking. Or an allowance.

JOHN

Well then, I guess he has nothing to lose and nothing to gain.

EVE

Sometimes I'm not so sure about that.

JOHN

What's that supposed to mean?

EVE

Have you told him about the flying?

JOHN

You were the first to know.

EVE

I always seem to get that honour. Has he talked to you about art school?

JOHN

Not really.

EVE

Then I wish you'd talk to him. And I wish you'd hold off telling him about flying.

JOHN

Why?

EVE

One thing at a time, that's all.

JOHN (after a pause)

I'll probably tell him what I damn well please. And he'll probably do the same. And if he wants to go to art school he'll do that too.

EVE

John, there's more to it than that and you know it.

JOHN

I'll talk to him about art school, Eve. I'd buy the damn place if that was what he wanted. But I won't make any promises about flying.

EVE

The interview's next week. I want to make sure he goes through with it.

JOHN

And I have a birthday coming up, don't I?

EVE

Afraid so.

JOHN

It's a cruel trick having a birthday on Remembrance Day. Come here. I want to show you something.

(John puts his arm around EVE and points to the sky.)

JOHN

See that cloud up there? The one shaped like a grin? That's where I'll be on my birthday.

EVE (pulling away)

Not if I can help it, John.

JOHN (holding her)

Do you think it'll still be there on my birthday? Do you think that cloud'll still be there?

EVE

Why, John? After all these years? Why would you want to do this? It's crazy.

JOHN

I can do anything I want now, can't I? Sell the house, buy the farm, write penpals, whittle away my time...

EVE

Is it because of Joyce? Is that why you want to sell the house?

JOHN

It has nothing to do with her. I couldn't even remember the smell of her damn perfume five minutes after she left. You should know better than that...

EVE

Then there's no reason...

JOHN

It's too late now. The wheels are in motion. I've turned down a generous offer of employment, informed my next of kin and I even wrote a letter to Nora.

EVE

Now what's that supposed to mean?

JOHN

It should mean something to you, Eve. But don't worry about it yet. I have many things to do before I go. Before my birthday.

(JOHN sits down with a piece of wood, a knife and whistles loudly.)

EVE

And how old will you be, John? How old and wise will you be?

(JOHN ignores EVE. She stares at him for a long moment, starts to speak, thinks better of it. She exits. JOHN throws a tool down in frustration.)

JOHN

You can't stop me!

(Pause.)

When was the last time you sabotaged an airplane, Eve?

It's inevitable. In..evitable.
In...Eve...able.

(Pause.)

And how old will I be?

(JOHN shakes his head in disgust and turns to his work area. A slow smile crosses his face. He picks up a piece of wood and stares at the end of it. He makes a great show of counting the rings.

Christ, between the two of us, we're damn near petrified.

(JOHN laughs to himself, carries the wood back to where he has been working at it. Stares at it, crouches down amidst the pile of wood.)

If I can just get you safely bolted down...I can take off.

(Sound of radio, music, drifts into the area, dreamlike.)

Turn the damn radio off!

(JOHN stops, startled.)

(Softly) Jesus...

(Lights fade up on memory scene.
YOUNG JOHN is pacing back and forth
reading a story from a well-used
magazine, chuckling to himself
occasionally. YOUNG EVE enters with
a muffin with a lit candle on it.)

YOUNG EVE (singing)

Happy birthday...to you...

(YOUNG JOHN hides the magazine and
blows out the candle.)

YOUNG JOHN

Just one candle?

YOUNG EVE

One fifth of a century.

YOUNG JOHN

Ahhhh...I see. Thank you, Nora.

YOUNG EVE

What? John, what are you reading?

YOUNG JOHN

I heard you reading this out loud to yourself. More than once.
I thought I'd see what all the fuss was about.

YOUNG EVE

You never heard any such thing.

YOUNG JOHN

Careful! That's my birthday cake you're waving around!

YOUNG EVE

Give me that magazine!

YOUNG JOHN

I'm not finished yet.

YOUNG EVE

If you think I don't have any way of getting back at you for
this, you'd better think again.

YOUNG JOHN

Ahhhh...the loving trust between brother and sister is a sacred
thing.

YOUNG EVE

Only up to a point. And then I start telling tales on you.

YOUNG JOHN

Who'd listen?

(He reads from the story.)

Her azure eyes flickered and glowed in the waning...

YOUNG EVE

It's not surprising that I can only think of one person that's even remotely interested...but that one person would be fascinated.

JOHN

One word to Joyce, I'll make you so sorry...

YOUNG EVE

Maybe I will and maybe I won't...

YOUNG JOHN

Mind you, I just thought of a real lulu I could spring on George! And it's not even true!

YOUNG EVE

Some sacred trust!

(YOUNG JOHN clears his throat to read.)

Oh go ahead. I'm not listening.

YOUNG JOHN

Hmmmm...even the title sends shivers up and down my spine. Nora at Daybreak...or is it Nora at Milking Time?

YOUNG EVE (making a grab for the magazine)

John...

YOUNG JOHN

Her azure eyes flickered and glowed in the waning light. As she parted her red, red lips...a symphony of sound burst forth. It was the last time he ever saw her...but he saw her name...Nora...emblazoned on the billboards and bright light signs...a burning emblem of her shining success...a dream fulfilled. "Songbird of Broadway". Oh that's rich...songbird...

(The crackling noises of a radio news broadcast are heard. YOUNG JOHN stops abruptly, drops the magazine and runs to radio.)

YOUNG EVE
Least you could have done is finish it.

YOUNG JOHN
Shhhh! News is on.

YOUNG EVE (fiercely)
I don't want to hear the news. I don't want to hear about Germany or Poland or the North Pole for that matter!

YOUNG JOHN
Well I do.

YOUNG EVE
You didn't even make a wish on your candle.

YOUNG JOHN
Don't have to. Everything's perfect.

YOUNG EVE (excited)
Did Mr. Ferron give you the job?

YOUNG JOHN
He might have if I'd asked him for it.

YOUNG EVE
What are we going to do for money if you don't work there?

YOUNG JOHN
Listen to the radio and pray for rain. Listen to the radio and then sit around and wait for the next broadcast...

YOUNG EVE
What are you going to do, John?

(Pause.)

I don't even know why I bother asking anymore. I should put two and two together. You don't even listen to the hockey game anymore. You sit in front of that news broadcast with your eyes as big as saucers. I don't even want to guess what's going on in your head.

YOUNG JOHN

You might as well.

YOUNG EVE

John, you're not going! I won't let you. You don't have to...

YOUNG JOHN

Too late. I already joined up. I joined the air force.

YOUNG EVE

You're just running away!

YOUNG JOHN

Yes, Eve. I am. I'm running away...and flying away.

YOUNG EVE

But what about all our plans? We can do it, John. I know we can...

YOUNG JOHN

We can't...we shouldn't...why don't you take George and run away to the city with him?

YOUNG EVE

I don't want to run anywhere with George...

(She stops short.)

Why didn't you tell me?

YOUNG JOHN

Because I was afraid you'd talk me out of it...

YOUNG EVE (angry)

And what makes you God's gift to the war effort?

YOUNG JOHN

I'd like to know what I'm doing here that's so all-fired important. I really would. Clerk in a dry goods store? Watching Dad work so I can take over his job someday? Watching the trains come in and watching the trains go out. While I sit in a desk and watch. I might be crazy but I'd rather go overseas.

YOUNG EVE

It's not a paid holiday, John! It's...

YOUNG JOHN

It'll be over and done with in 3 months. That's what you keep saying! Maybe you're right.

(Pause. YOUNG EVE realizes she is beaten.)

YOUNG EVE

And what will I do...what will we do while you're gone? What will I do?

YOUNG JOHN

You can write me letters...you can sing...you can read your story in peace...and you can wait for me to come back...

(Pause.)

YOUNG EVE

Can I have your birthday wish? The one you didn't use?

(YOUNG JOHN nods. The two move close to each other as YOUNG JOHN lights the candle. Lights fade on memory scene.)

(JOHN stands listening and watching the memory scene.)

JOHN (yelling)

Boxer! Boxer!

(He stops, shakes his head. He looks at the house, takes a few steps in the direction of the house.)

You haven't beat me yet, you know. If I can't sell you I might burn you to the ground. Or turn you into a wax museum. Radio and all...

(JOHN starts toward the house as BOXER enters.)

BOXER

Hi, John. Does Pederson always screen your visitors or is it just my boyish charm?

JOHN (disoriented)

Mrs. Pederson?

BOXER

Your neighbour. She was hanging over the fence giving me her theory on cold fronts when you yelled. Nothing's the matter, is it? You sounded like you were calling me back from the dead.

JOHN

Maybe I was, afterall.

BOXER

How are you doing anyway?

JOHN

Born again, Boxer. Born again.

BOXER

Yeah, that'll be the day. When hell freezes over.

JOHN

Pretty skeptical for a guy your age, aren't you? What'll you have?

BOXER

Ahhh...nothing.

JOHN

What's the matter with you? I thought you were part of the me generation.

BOXER

I'll have a club sandwich. And a beer.

JOHN

Figures. Will a pop do you?

(BOXER nods. JOHN opens a pop for him.)

JOHN

First one's on the house. Pull up a chair and let's talk about art school.

BOXER

You got any ice?

JOHN

Not till hell freezes over. Just slosh it around in your mouth and it'll cool off. Now...

BOXER

You got anything to mix with this?

JOHN

Pour it on your head and catch the drippings after they've slid down your nose. Now when's this deadline?

(BOXER raises the can over his head, threatening to follow JOHN's suggestion. JOHN leans over and spills a little pop on BOXER's lap. BOXER throws more than a little pop back at JOHN, spilling some on himself in the process.)

JOHN (laughing)

Smartass kid!

(JOHN grabs BOXER by the arm and slowly pours the pop over his head.)

BOXER (laughing and choking)

Just remember I don't have any respect for my elders...

JOHN (still holding BOXER)

Then...don't forget...you're a runt!

(BOXER manages to pull JOHN down to the ground. JOHN is breathing a little hard and BOXER is laughing too hard, so both collapse into a heap.)

Now there's serious discussion off to a fine start...

(BOXER leaps up, jumps on the pop can, squashing it.)

BOXER

There's what I think of deadlines and...cold fronts!

(Both collapse with laughter again. The laughter slowly subsides. JOHN slowly pulls himself to his feet. BOXER brushes off his clothes.)

JOHN

You want another pop, you wasteful mutt?

(BOXER smiles and nods. JOHN opens two more pop.)

BOXER

Thanks. Hey, maybe Pederson knows where I can get some ice...

JOHN

Hmmmm...maybe she knows about art school too.

(Pause.)

BOXER

I guess Mom put a bug in your ear...

JOHN

I guess I already had one.

BOXER

Well, I don't know.

JOHN

Maybe you should get one of those career matchbooks and send away for a trade. You could be an interior designer or a fridge repairman.

BOXER

Maybe I should.

JOHN

Not in much of a fighting mood are you?

BOXER

Nothing to fight about, I guess.

JOHN

Did you want to take a crack at this art school thing or not?

BOXER

Yeah, I do. I do sometime.

JOHN

And what's wrong with right now?

BOXER

Maybe now's not the right time. It's a pretty big commitment to make, don't you think?

JOHN

That's how these things are generally done. There's no need to worry about "commitment" yet.

BOXER

What do you mean?

JOHN

You haven't been accepted yet. Which brings us back to where we started. When's the deadline?

BOXER

I'm supposed to talk to the guy next week and take him my stuff...

JOHN

Your "stuff"?

BOXER

My drawings and...stuff.

JOHN

What -- some chicken salad sandwiches or model cars...a marble collection...

BOXER

My portfolio! What are you...

JOHN

Just wanted to hear you say it, that's all. You were sounding like you might clean out your room and give him a box of your old toys or something.

BOXER (defensive)

I've got those landscapes and all my sketches and some photography and...

JOHN

I know what you've got. I've seen it.

BOXER

Well then, what are you on to me about?

JOHN

Just putting a burr under your ass, I guess. You gotta go in there thinking you're good.

BOXER

Well I am!

JOHN

Good. So what's the trouble?

BOXER

I'm scared shitless. Not about my...portfolio. About...leaving...things here.

JOHN

About being from a small town and having a piece of straw fall out of your back pocket?

BOXER

Oh come on. I've been to the college...

JOHN

But this is different isn't it?

BOXER

Maybe it is.

(JOHN turns to his work considers
a piece of wood, searches for a
tool.)

JOHN

Just think of the write-up you'd get.

BOXER

What?

JOHN

Write-up. In the paper.

(BOXER is still puzzled. JOHN
continues working.)

Dressed in floor-length denim and carrying a bouquet of squashed
popcans...the local boy made good.

BOXER (laughing)

Oh, they'd want a picture too. With a beret on! A last look at
the kid before he gets corrupted...

JOHN

Before he starts making etchings...

BOXER

And gets lost in the...in the seedy underworld of the city!

JOHN

We'll have to get you a job dusting hymnbooks instead...right
here in town!

BOXER

Hell no! I want my write-up!

(JOHN turns sharply away from his
work.)

JOHN (serious now)

Then you'll go.

BOXER

I guess so. What are you going to do now?

JOHN

Oh, I've got a pretty full calendar. What with all the excitement over Hallowe'en.

BOXER (blurts it out)

Mom's worried about you.

JOHN

Because I won't go trick or treating tonight?

BOXER

She said you had some kind of crazy notion.

JOHN

Boy, she didn't tell you much, did she? I've had a lot of crazy notions. Is that all she told you?

BOXER

I had lunch with her. She was...pretty upset.

JOHN

About the flying?

BOXER

What!?

JOHN

You heard me.

BOXER

I heard you but I don't get it. What about flying?

JOHN

I'm going to take it up again. Take it up and take off...

BOXER

But you haven't flown a plane since the war...

JOHN

So it's about time...

BOXER

But do you still know how?

JOHN

I'll pick it up again pretty fast.

BOXER

When are you going to do it?

JOHN

Pretty soon.

BOXER

Why didn't you...

JOHN

Do it before?

BOXER

Well, yeah...

JOHN

You stay away from card games in the city there -- I can read you like a book. Next question.

BOXER

Why are you doin' it now?

JOHN

I thought I'd develop some hobbies...to get me through my twilight years...

BOXER

Is it anything to do with Aunt Joyce? I mean, her leaving and everything?

JOHN

Now, Boxer...

BOXER

I just meant, maybe she didn't want you to fly...

JOHN (chuckling)

Or now that John's wife has left him, he's picked up all sorts of "crazy notions".

(Pause.)

BOXER

I don't think it's crazy. I don't think it's crazy at all.

JOHN

Then what do you think?

BOXER

I think...I think it's great. But I still want to know what made you decide to do it now.

JOHN

I don't know if I can even tell you all the answers. If you can tell me why I stayed with Joyce as long as I did then maybe I could tell you why I'm taking up flying now. Maybe if you could listen to the walls of that house...(abrupt change of mood) you'd hear a tap dripping or some mice or some damn thing.

(Slight pause.)

You want all that pop?

BOXER

Guess not.

JOHN

Mind if I have a swig?

BOXER

Course not.

JOHN

Or maybe it's like your art school. Quite a commitment to make.

BOXER

Can I come with you? I'd like to come with you.

JOHN

Only if I can come to art school with you...

BOXER

I mean it. Can I come with you?

JOHN

You want to come?

BOXER

Yes.

JOHN

I don't even know when I'm going.

BOXER

I don't care. I want to come.

JOHN

If you're around, maybe...

BOXER

I'll be here.

JOHN

Now, Boxer. You've got interviews to go to, "stuff" to take, a mother to make happy.

BOXER

I'd like to come...when you go to the airport and things like that. I'd like to...

JOHN

I don't know why, but I'd like it too.

EVE (offstage)

John! You out here?

BOXER

I guess we won't go right now, hey?

JOHN (chuckling)

I guess not.

(EVE enters. She is carrying a pot and a couple of bowls.)

EVE (to BOXER)

There you are! I thought you might be here.

JOHN

You come all the way over here to feed Boxer?

EVE

No, I came here to feed you. I've got pot roast and beet pickles and potato salad...

JOHN

Alright. I surrender.

BOXER

Guess I better go.

JOHN

Boxer, you're not going to leave me on my own with the pot roast, are you?

BOXER

Sorry, John old boy. You'll have to face this one on your own.

JOHN

But Boxer...it's the pot roast! And the salad. Heavy artillery.

EVE

Alright you two. Enough. Now what have you been up to?

JOHN

Are we supposed to say "no good"?

EVE

Has Boxer been helping you?

BOXER

That's it. I was helping John.

EVE

Did you get anything settled?

JOHN

Let me see...I guess we decided the U.N. should organize a turkey raffle to see who gets Idi Amin.

EVE

I mean about art school.

BOXER

John's gonna go in my place.

EVE (angrily)

Stop it! Stop it, both of you.

(Uncomfortable pause.)

JOHN

Now Eve, don't get excited.

EVE

Why not? If you're going to be the local authority on everything I'd like to know what kind of propaganda you're putting out.

BOXER

It's okay, Mom. We talked it out. We...

EVE

So you're going?

BOXER

Why didn't you tell me John was going to fly?

EVE

I knew he'd tell you. Why don't you go with him to the interview, John?

BOXER

That'd be great. Can you come?

JOHN

I don't think so...I don't know just yet. When was it again?

BOXER

Next week. Day before your birthday. You could say you're the local authority. If Mom says you're the local authority, then...

JOHN

Now just hold it. I never said I'd go. I've got things to do.

BOXER

You need some help out here?

JOHN (sharply)

No. Thanks, Boxer.

BOXER (hurt)

But no thanks. Yeah...I guess I'll see you later.

EVE

You going out tonight?

(BOXER starts to exit.)

BOXER

Don't know.

EVE

Of course you know. Don't get into any trouble.

BOXER

Who are you talking to? You're the one that's going to the wild party.

(BOXER exits.)

EVE (calling after him)

When will you be in? Boxer!

(JOHN sits down with a piece of wood and begins sanding. EVE watches him for a moment and puts down her pots.)

EVE (uncertainly)

It's coming along.

JOHN

Boy, you've really come in waving a white flag, haven't you? Pot roast and then a critical opinion.

EVE

You've been spending a lot of time out here.

(Pause.)

I guess you're not making a coffee table or a bookshelf, are you?

JOHN

Why'd you plant that idea in his head? About me going to the interview.

EVE

Why did you tell him about your flying? Is this really all that important that you can't leave it?

JOHN

Yes, it damn well is. I can't explain.

EVE (softly)

Can you explain about Nora?

JOHN

Are we going to eat that stuff or do you want me to weave it into the wood here?

EVE

John...

JOHN

You remember those stories you used to read...curled up in the window seat? In Chatelaine or Good Dream-making or whatever the hell it was. One keeps sticking in my head. The one you used to read out loud. Do you remember what the name of it was?

EVE (evasively)

Why?

JOHN

The character in the story was Nora. So there you go.

EVE (after a pause)

How do you remember these things? Why do you remember?

(EVE takes paper plates out and puts food on the plates.)

JOHN

I don't know, Eve. I wish I didn't. I guess I'm just picking up where I left off. Something went wrong when I was about 19. And I'm just picking up where I left off.

EVE

You can't do that, John.

JOHN

I don't even remember what I've been doing for the last 30 years...

EVE

You can't do it, John.

JOHN

So I'm going to refresh my memory. Simple, really. Simple case of "where did I go wrong"...

EVE

And that's why you want to fly again?

JOHN

I guess that's why I keep remembering things, remembering times. My brain's sent out a tracer for some kind of turning point...

EVE

That's ridiculous, John. And even if it were true, why did it just occur to you now? You could have done this 20 years ago.

JOHN

Couldn't. Had other responsibilities.

EVE

Couldn't do it because you were scared, that's why. Scared the same thing would happen as the time you took George up.

JOHN (ignoring her)

And now's the perfect time, it seems. Soon as I sell the house, finish up around here.

EVE

I know about it, you know. I know all about it. George told me.

JOHN

That his Hallowe'en costume sitting in the bag there? I admire a man who lives on through his wardrobe.

EVE

He said you took him up in the airplane and then you got scared. You were going to do some tricks and then you got scared.

JOHN

Just wanted to see if he'd throw up on his tweed jacket. I think he would have rather bailed out than muss his jacket.

EVE

You were scared, John!

JOHN

That was twenty years ago!

EVE

Yes, John. It's in the past. It's history. Flying is something from the past.

JOHN

So is George. And Joyce. And being scared.

EVE

You never liked him.

JOHN

Ha! No speaking ill of the dead.

EVE

It's been two years. You can if you want.

JOHN

Guess it was mutual, eh? And you never cared for Joyce.

EVE

She was jealous of me, because of Boxer.

JOHN

Well maybe I was too.

(Long pause.)

EVE

Did you talk to Boxer?

JOHN

We had a can of pop.

EVE

Is he going to go? To this interview?

JOHN

I figure so.

EVE

He's talented, isn't he?

JOHN

Yes, Eve. He is.

EVE

Did you tell him so?

JOHN

Did you?

EVE

It wouldn't make much difference what I said, John. He...doesn't think I know anything about things like that.

JOHN

And what happens when he finds I'm old and wizened instead of old and wise?

EVE

I guess you'll have to deal with that when it comes.

(JOHN turns sharply and looks at
EVE. She remains impassive.)

JOHN

I've been having...dreams.

EVE

Haven't we all?

JOHN

They're not dreams. They're memories. Only maybe they're not right. Because I never call them up on my own. I don't sit back in my armchair and "ruminate" about days gone by. They just swoop into my head like flame-tipped arrows. They're like old pictures... old photos with a gilt edging. And they're always dragging me back before the war...

EVE

Is that how things are for you now, John? Before war and after war. The two eras. I never thought you'd get like that. You sound like one of the old vets down at the Legion.

JOHN

Only it's never me, Eve. In the memories. It's always Boxer. I see Boxer in my dreams.

EVE (uneasily)

Now why would you do that?

JOHN

Me...Boxer...someone in between. Me and you. Me wanting to fly.

EVE

You never wanted to fly. That's not what you wanted. Don't you see? That's something that happened...because of the war.

JOHN

Before war and after war, hey?

EVE

And what does Boxer have to do with it?

JOHN

I don't know. Only he's there. Fighting with you about flying, and teasing you about your dream girl Nora.

EVE

Don't you get Boxer mixed up in this, John. Don't you think of Boxer like that. This is another time...

JOHN

Don't you think about those times?

EVE

As little as possible. You going to eat that?

JOHN

Pot roast soothes the fevered brow, eh?

EVE

Have you tried on the costume? It's not the pirate outfit but it'll do. Sort of a military thing. A red jacket and...do you have some light pants you could wear with it?

JOHN

Is there a fur hat in the bag?

EVE

No...

JOHN

Too bad. If there had been a fur hat with it I might have jumped at the chance. Oh well. There's always next year.

EVE

I'll pick you up about 8.

JOHN

It's a damn shame I'm so busy here in Santa's workshop or I'd be happy to go.

EVE

John, please.

JOHN

What is this?...some kind of mental health scheme? Get John out of the house?

EVE

Out of the backyard. And yes...maybe it is. You haven't been out anywhere for weeks.

JOHN

I don't have to go out. I have visiting hours in my backyard.

EVE

Maybe if you get out of the house you'll stop thinking about these things for a while. Sometimes it's like you're in a fantasy world. Flying and Nora...

JOHN

But I am going to fly and I did write the letter.

EVE

This letter...

JOHN

A letter to Nora. I spent a memorial day with Eve in the heart of Paris. With a girl who looked just like you. Or sounded just like you...or something. It was just after the Liberation. And just before I came home. We didn't talk much as you can imagine. Except for words like cigarette and...uh...apartment.

EVE

I'm not sure I want to hear about this...

JOHN

The key word was cigarette. It was the basis of our relationship. I couldn't pronounce her real name. So I called her Nora. She was a singer. Like the girl in the story.

(Chuckles.)

Like the sister at home. Spent her days mopping tables in a cafe and her nights singing in old run-down clubs. I stood under the Eiffel Tower for an hour and a half listening to her repeat my name. That's where she left me too. Shouting at each other over the crowd. She was a lot like you, somehow...

EVE

And you sent her a letter.

JOHN

Yep. First letter I've written in years. The last one was to say I'd be coming home. The last letter after the liberation of Paris.

EVE

That's a very long time to wait for a letter. That's a long time to wait.

(Lights fade up on YOUNG EVE. JOHN returns to his work. EVE's memory.)

YOUNG EVE

"Come on in, come on in"...oh God don't come in...please go away...
"Heat's terrible, isn't it? ...Will you have a cold drink?"...Is
my mother home?...no, no she's not...Father? No...no, just me.
Only me...Come home mother...come home John.

(YOUNG EVE freezes.)

JOHN

She said she was going to be famous. She said she was going to sing in all the best nightclubs. Another Edith Piaf. Her eyes sparkled so bright when she talked about it that you could almost see the neon lights flashing.

(Pause.)

And I told her I was going to fly around the world. I told her that I would likely have occasion to stop in Paris. I thought I could do anything. I was pretty damned pleased with myself. Pleased not to be missing. Pleased to be alive.

(JOHN smiles at the memory as lights brighten on YOUNG EVE again.)

YOUNG EVE

I beg your pardon...missing...South of France? "Yes, I'm sorry, too, very sorry." Yes, I'll tell them. What in God's name am I supposed to tell them...

(YOUNG EVE freezes. EVE paces to dispell the memory.)

JOHN

So now maybe I'll fly to Paris. I'll fly anywhere. A rendezvous in the middle of the Atlantic.

EVE

Why did you write to her, John?

JOHN

I want to find out if she's famous. If she's Nora afterall. Maybe she only books one singing engagement a year now. And then retires to her country home.

EVE

She might have never had a chance to do any of those things. Maybe she won't even answer.

JOHN

Maybe she won't. I might go to the middle of the Atlantic anyway.

(Lights fade up on YOUNG EVE.)

YOUNG EVE

All we do is wait. Wait for news. Good news...bad news. Wait for news...wait for you...it might be a long time...a long time to wait. Some things can't wait...

(Lights fade completely on YOUNG EVE.)

EVE

What do you think I did? What do you think my memories are?

JOHN

I don't know.

EVE

What do you think I did between the letters?

JOHN

You were in love...

EVE

Not that much. Not that much in love. Not enough anyway. When George stepped off that train I knew that I had been waiting for you to come home. Not George. He was just another face pressed against the window on another train. That's what I remember, John. That's what I remember.

(Pause.)

I must turn up in their dreams.

JOHN

Whose dreams?

EVE

The soldiers. Soldiers' wives, soldiers' children. The hundreds and thousands that made their way across the country. I'm sure I saw the same faces once, twice, thirty times. I went to the station twice a week, every week. For six years. For some reason I thought that if I met every train...that one of those soldiers...one of those faces would light up, drop their bags and run into my arms.

(Pause.)

EVE

All those faces...pressed against the glass. The tired mothers and scared kids and wrinkled uniforms. Soldiers. Picking the straw out of their kit bags as they adjusted their berets. They'd never seen anything before except their own back forty. And me. I must turn up in their dreams. With a thermos of coffee and a sandwich and always...always...waving goodbye.

JOHN

And waiting for me.

EVE

Waiting for you...and waiting for myself. And I'm not going to do it again, John. I'm not going to wait to hear that an old dreamy man piled his plane into a thicket of trees. And I'm not going to wait for Boxer to find out he's 40 years old and nothing to show for it. You had your chance, John, and so did I. And now you hold Boxer's chance in the palm of your hand...

JOHN

I see him in my head, Eve. Only it's me.

EVE

Isn't it enough that I have to stand by and watch you wallow in days gone by? Why should you be allowed to do it when I have to forget all those times?

JOHN

You chose what you wanted...

EVE (fiercely)

No, I didn't. I almost did, John. I might have done a lot of things too, John. I might have married someone else. I might have left town. I wanted to leave. I was going to leave. I was going to let someone else take care of the "war effort". I was going to be something...a waitress...a secretary...a singer...or an acrobat.

JOHN

Well why didn't you...

EVE

Did I ever tell you about the liberation in our little town? When you were in Paris. Maybe it was the same night. I was sleeping and dreaming about leaving. And waiting in my sleep.

Hot summer night and the windows were open. And the first light of day just starting to streak the curtains. Something woke me. 4 in the morning and there was noise in a little town that always slept during the day and stopped breathing after midnight. A noise. It was a horn honking.

EVE (cont'd.)

I almost went back to sleep but my dream was already gone for good... so I got up. Who in the world could it be? Out driving drunk at 4 in the morning. The horn was louder by that time and whoever it was was heading up our street. I went out on the porch...half expecting to see old Charlie drive into a fence.

It was Roy Samson. The telegraph operator. Careening down the street in his old Buick. All the windows open, driving with one hand and laying on the horn for all he was worth. And yelling... hollering...bellering...at the top of his voice...JOHN MORGAN'S ALIVE! JOHN MORGAN'S ALIVE...ALIVE...

House lights snapping on like Christmas bulbs by that time. People opening their doors, stumbling on to their steps. I ran out into the street in my nightgown and they all ran out to meet me. We danced around in the dust like ghosts in our nightshirts. John Morgan's alive...

(Pause.)

You were coming home and I couldn't leave. Couldn't leave then... you were alive...

JOHN

Yes I was, Eve. I was goddamn well alive.

(Lights fade to black.)

End of Act One.

ACT TWO

It is almost midday. The work area in the back yard is even more cluttered than before. There is more wood, more pop cans, old jackets and even some old magazines. At the same time, much progress can be seen. There are several pieces of wood set aside that are completely finished. JOHN and BOXER are just offstage. They are moving the radio into the backyard.

JOHN

Easy...easy...

BOXER

You got it?

JOHN (singing between breaths)

Ada...Riley...was that sort of...girl...

BOXER

That a real song?...

JOHN

Sure...oops. Sorry.

BOXER

Oh come on...get the corner, the corner!

JOHN

You ready?

BOXER

Turn it the other way and I'll sing Happy Birthday to you.

JOHN

I thought I was giving the orders...Christ!

(Loud thump.)

BOXER

You gonna lift it or you wanna drop it on my other foot?

JOHN

No...go ahead. Go.

(BOXER and JOHN stagger in carrying the old radio. JOHN is wearing dress pants, dress shoes, a Legion blazer and an old baseball cap. JOHN puts down his end of the radio and surveys the backyard.)

BOXER

Where do you want it?

JOHN

Where I can keep an eye on it.

BOXER (exasperated)

Where do you want it?!

JOHN

Over here.

(They drag the radio close to JOHN's work area.)

That oughta do it.

BOXER

Whatever you say.

JOHN

Can I offer you a Schwepps for your trouble?

BOXER

Okay. Don't you ever drink juice or anything like that?

JOHN

Carbonated drinks stimulate the creative process. Orange juice is for chartered accountants.

BOXER

Does ice bugger up your process too?

(JOHN licks a finger and holds it up to the wind.)

JOHN

Not today.

(BOXER rummages through the provisions and gets some ice. JOHN opens some pop for himself. They drink in silence.)

BOXER (lifting his can in a toast)
Happy Birthday.

JOHN (lifting his can)
How was the big city?

BOXER
You sure you want to hear about it now, or do you wanna move some more furniture first?

JOHN
If you want to do the dusting while you talk, that's fine with me.

BOXER
Yeah, I bet. You gonna crank that radio up?

JOHN
No.

BOXER
Why'd you bring it out here then? To set pop cans on?

JOHN
Every day and in every way...you get to be more of a smartass.

BOXER
Well, why did we move it out here?

JOHN
I told you. I want to keep an eye on it.

(Pause.)

You know the expression "they're playing our song"? Well I'd rather they didn't.

BOXER
I don't get it.

JOHN (exasperated)
A lot of things happened around that radio. It's just about the only thing that Joyce didn't redecorate. It's from the "old days".

(Pause.)

I figured if I could get it out of the...haunted house there...I'd stop having dreams and...

BOXER
Oh.

JOHN

Now aren't you sorry you asked?

BOXER

I don't know yet. Keep going.

JOHN

No, you keep going. I don't think we even got as far as your trip on the Greyhound bus. How was it?

BOXER

Oh, delightful.

JOHN

Ahh, yes. Smell of Saniflush filling up your nostrils...a rest stop every 10 minutes at the next town.

BOXER

You got it.

JOHN

Then what? When did you get there?

BOXER

Just before lunch.

JOHN

And there was someone from the art school waiting with a sedan chair, right?

BOXER

No. Then I had lunch. Toasted bacon and tomato sandwich. Coffee.

JOHN

Christ, that's interesting, Boxer. Then what did you do?

BOXER

Then I got on another bus. I went to the art gallery.

JOHN

Hmmmm. What time was the interview?

BOXER

2 o'clock. So I wandered around the art gallery for a while. Then I got on another bus and went to the interview. Then I got on another bus and came home.

JOHN

You didn't stay at Harold's overnight?

BOXER

Yeah, I forgot. Did that too.

JOHN

Weren't you supposed to pick up some things for Eve?

BOXER

Did that after the art gallery, before the interview.

JOHN

And how was it?

BOXER

It was all there. Got everything she wanted.

(Pause.)

The interview was a snap. It was great.

(Pause. JOHN looks at BOXER. BOXER avoids his gaze.)

JOHN

Glad to hear it.

(JOHN turns to his work. BOXER wanders around the work area. He looks at the pile of magazines, flips through a few, finds a Plain Truth magazine.)

BOXER

What's this? Plain Truth? You finally giving up the ghost and converting?

JOHN

I'm writing a rebuttal entitled "It's a damn lie".

BOXER

That's a relief. That'd be something else crazy if you were...

(JOHN turns sharply to look at BOXER. BOXER stops, embarrassed.)

JOHN

The way I've got it figured...God's sitting on the edge of the ozone layer in a windbreaker laughing at us. I thought I'd fly up there and ask how he feels about all these aerosol spray outfits.

(Pause.)

JOHN

That crazy enough for you?

BOXER

Sure. Sure it is.

(JOHN turns to his work again.
BOXER continues looking through
magazines.)

Hey, there's some really old magazines here. A...Chatelaine from 1940. Another Chatelaine from...Why have you got these out here?

JOHN

Same reason I brought the radio out, I guess.

BOXER

I don't know if I ever got that straight.

JOHN

And I don't know if I ever got the whole story on your trip yet. It kind of whizzed past me. You don't mind filling in some of the details, do you? How many refills did you have on the cup of coffee? How were the pictures hanging? Any good-looking girls at the school?

BOXER

Five refills and fourteen good-looking girls.

JOHN

Is that right, Boxer?

BOXER

I went to the art gallery, I got on the bus and I rode all over the city. I got lost. I was late. When I got there he wasn't there.

JOHN

Horseshit!

BOXER

I was so late I decided not to go. Better not to go at all than to walk in an hour late.

JOHN

No wonder it was such a snap. You never even set foot in the damn building.

BOXER

I was late!

JOHN
You're lying.

BOXER
If you say so.

(Pause.)

JOHN
Do you want to tell me about it?

BOXER
I imagine I will eventually.

JOHN
Alright.

(JOHN turns to his work. He chooses one of the finished pieces and begins clearing a space for it. He examines the wood, long and hard, and then sets it down. He begins clearing an area in the middle of his work space.)

BOXER
Are you still selling the house?

JOHN
It's in the listings.

BOXER
Anyone come to look at it yet?

JOHN
No. I imagine it's too full of whispers and weeping for anyone else to want to take it on.

BOXER
Even with the radio out?

JOHN
Even with the radio out. That kind of thing leaks through the floor boards.

BOXER
When do you think you'll be finished out here?

JOHN
I don't really know. Pretty soon.

JOHN (cont'd.)

I don't really know whether I'm building a picket fence or a monument.

BOXER

I think it's a monument.

JOHN (turning from his work)

Do you, Boxer? What do you think I'm doing back here?

BOXER

I thought you were just...puttering...when you first started.

JOHN

I wonder if Eve still thinks I'm making her a coffee table for Christmas...

BOXER

I don't think so. I might have thought that too...for a while. You're always making something. You've always been like that. When you hauled all this wood back here I didn't think anything of it. Remember when you made the feed bag for Harold?

(JOHN chuckles.)

Did you ever give that to him?

(JOHN shakes his head.)

And the pyramid. I remember when you were out here every weekend for about a month making that thing.

(Pause.)

But this is different. I watch you sometimes and you get this look on your face...this look like you're carving the history of the world on to some kind of tablet. What are you doing out here, John?

JOHN (offhand)

I've covered B.C. and I'm halfway through A.D. I kind of got stuck around the Rise of the Third Reich.

BOXER

I mean it, John.

JOHN

And I mean I'd tell you if I knew.

BOXER

You gotta know. You must...

JOHN

And you must know why you didn't go yesterday. Do you?

BOXER

I meant to go. I thought I was going yesterday morning. When I was sitting on the bus, the Greyhound, I was figuring out what I was going to say. After I had that sandwich I was even more sure.

(Pause.)

I started to get a bit crazy when I was in the art gallery. Scared, crazy...I don't know. I just wanted to turn around and come right home. Maybe it was from staring at paintings by people who are a million years ahead of me. Maybe I just changed my mind. Maybe it was something in the sandwich. But I got on the bus and I figured I'd just get someone to push me out of the door when I got to my stop.

(Pause.)

No one pushed me out of the bus so I didn't get off. I missed my stop and went all the way around the route again.

(Pause.)

And that's it. That's the whole story.

JOHN

Have you told your mother?

BOXER

No. I told her...

JOHN

You told her the same things you told me. A snap.

BOXER

Well she's not going to be very pleased with you either.

JOHN

Why not?

BOXER

Aren't you supposed to be at the Remembrance Day services? That's where Mom is.

JOHN

I'm busy.

BOXER

Kind of looks like you figured on going.

JOHN

Nope. All my other blue blazers and dress pants were in the wash.

BOXER

All your other berets, too?

(BOXER picks up JOHN's Legion beret which is lying in a pile of pop cans. JOHN takes the beret from BOXER and gently brushes it off.)

JOHN

I couldn't go.

BOXER

Neither could I...

JOHN

This is a little different, Boxer. Once, a very long time ago, I felt like this. It was a Sunday and your grandmother was dead set on me going to church. It was a special service for those of us who had come home from the war. Complete with a picnic and three-legged races. And one-legged races. I knew I couldn't go. I knew there was a reason not to go. I finally gave in, though. I went and had benedictions and cold chicken. I spent the whole afternoon with this queasy feeling in my stomach, a sharp pain at the back of my brain. I just knew. While I was gone my best friend from the flight squadron came to visit. He waited around for as long as he could but he had to leave a note. He...got killed in a farming accident six months later. Five years of shooting spitballs into a blast furnace and he gets killed checking a fanbelt on a combine.

(Pause.)

BOXER

And that's how you feel today?

JOHN

Yes. This...has happened before. Sometimes it means I'm going to run out of gas around the next bend. Sometimes it's a little more. It's like having a dream while you're still awake. Or running over a memory...that hasn't happened yet.

BOXER

Memories?

JOHN

Not sunsets and family reunions and photo albums. It's like veins in the wall of a cave.

BOXER

What's going to happen?

JOHN (evasively)

I don't know. Your mother will probably give me hell about missing the service. Then she'll give you hell about missing the interview. And then we'll all have birthday cake.

(JOHN turns to work on his sculpture. His pace is more frenetic than it has ever been previously. He seems to be looking for something, as he handles different pieces of wood in turn. He rummages through his pile for some sanding paper and sets to work on a piece of wood.)

BOXER

She's going to do more than give me hell. She's going to...

JOHN

What are your plans now, Boxer?

BOXER

I don't know. I...was kind of thinking I might do a stint out at the gas plant. Eric and Joey work out there. It's 8 bucks an hour starting wages.

JOHN

How long Eric and Joey been there?

BOXER

Oh, about a year. They're saving up to go to Europe.

JOHN

Didn't Eric just pile his dad's truck into a wall or something?

BOXER

Yeah, yeah I guess he did.

JOHN

So I guess he'll be working there another year, won't he?

BOXER

Maybe, I don't know.

JOHN

Is that what you want to do?

BOXER

I don't know. It'll be okay for a while.

JOHN

And then what?

BOXER

I don't know. I guess I'll see when...

JOHN

You don't know much, do you?

BOXER

Is that a dare or a prophecy?

JOHN

Well, if you're not going to art school you might as well go the whole hog. Why don't you join the army?

BOXER

What do you want from me?

JOHN

What do you want from me?

BOXER

I want...I want to run away and I never want to leave here.

JOHN (after a pause)

Well, maybe you better run away...for now. That's not a dare or a prophecy.

BOXER (after a pause)

You want anything? Cigarettes or...something?

JOHN

Warm pop.

BOXER

I'll see if they got any of that.

(BOXER prepares to leave. JOHN suddenly throws down the tool he's been holding and turns to BOXER.)

JOHN

Boxer?

BOXER

Yeah?

JOHN

You feel like taking a turn out to the airport?

BOXER

To the airport?

JOHN

That's what I said. I'd appreciate some company.

BOXER

I must be getting up in the world. Never had an invitation to the airport before.

JOHN

Maybe that's because I never go.

BOXER

Really? Well, how in the hell...

JOHN

You never been out there?

BOXER

I went to a fly-in breakfast once. I did some models when I was little. But I've never even been up in a small plane.

JOHN

I'm surprised your mother hasn't dragged you out there. That woman's just crazy about airplanes.

BOXER

Are you kidding? I think she gets sick watching kites let alone... Oh, you are kidding.

(Pause.)

I guess I've always been sort of warned off the property about airplanes. I woke up one Christmas morning and there was a pile of hockey equipment under the tree. And that was that.

JOHN (carefully)

Did your dad ever say anything about flying?

BOXER

I don't know. Not that I remember.

JOHN

Well, just give me a minute, Boxer. Gotta change out of my work clothes.

BOXER

What are you going to wear...your suit?

(JOHN begins to move to house.)

JOHN
Smartass kid.

BOXER
Here's your beret.

(BOXER picks up JOHN's beret and a handful of mail.)

And your mail. Hey, there's an airmail letter here.

JOHN
I know.

BOXER
Aren't you going to open it?

JOHN
I will, Boxer. But I don't have to do it right now. Either way it's my flying papers.

BOXER
What?

JOHN
Never mind. Let's get going while the sky's still clear.

BOXER
Okay.

(BOXER exits toward the house and JOHN, after a long hard look at his sculpture, follows him. Lights fade up as airplane noise comes up. The volume increases to an almost deafening level and then changes slightly from engine noise to the sound a bomber makes when it takes a dive. The light comes up slowly on JOHN. He is in a memory area and seems completely disoriented. The sound of radio music, big band jazz fades quietly into the scene. YOUNG EVE moves into the space.

YOUNG EVE
You're home now. It's alright. You've got your whole life ahead of you.

JOHN (weary, mechanical)

Most of the time I felt like a pebble snapped out of a slingshot. Some rotten little kid with his sights trained on a gopher was loading us up, gritting his teeth and letting go. Up you go... you're doing fine...and then boom. In for a landing. Then do it all over again. Sometimes I wanted to take a big roll of black tape and wrap it around the belly of my Spitfire. Or patch it up with bubble gum...take a wrong turn and come home.

YOUNG EVE

What was London like? I'd like to go there sometime. I wish I'd been there with you.

JOHN

But most of the time I just wanted to sleep. You know...I think I flew that plane in my sleep sometimes. You just get to the good part of the dream and someone's shooting at you. And down you go. Drift off just nicely and someone drags you into the plane again. That's not an airplane; that's a tin cup.

YOUNG EVE

Do you want to drive around town? There's a new drugstore now. And a lot of new houses over by Thompsens. You want to take a drive?

JOHN

I just want to sleep...

(Pause. YOUNG EVE's manner changes perceptibly. She has been coaxing and bright. Now her voice takes on a weariness, resignation.)

YOUNG EVE

I think I'm going to...marry George. He's got a job here in town.

JOHN

It's so damn quiet in this house. I don't even think the grass has grown since I left. Quiet as the grave all day long and then I go to sleep and I hear engine noises...propellers flapping like bird's wings.

YOUNG EVE

It's all over now. You're home now. It's all over.

(YOUNG EVE exits.)

JOHN

That was the best goddamn time I've ever had. I'm so goddamn glad I'm home. Oh Christ, Eve. I'm so goddamn tired. Eve...Eve...

(Lights fade on scene. EVE enters. She is dressed for the Remembrance Day service: white skirt, navy blazer, navy tam. EVE comes in mad and then stops when she sees JOHN.)

EVE

John? Are you alright?

JOHN (without turning around)

I'm so goddamn tired.

EVE

John...

JOHN

What?...Oh, hello.

EVE

How's the wandering woodcarver today?

JOHN

I'm not just sure.

EVE

Do you wear a watch anymore? Or maybe you're just on a different calendar than I am.

JOHN

Take it easy, Eve.

EVE

I swear I've spent half my life waiting for you. Do you even know what day it is?

JOHN

It's my birthday.

EVE

Is that why you're all dressed up?

JOHN

No, no it's not.

EVE

It's November 11th and it's...1:30 in the afternoon. Does that ring a bell? Does it mean anything to you besides the fact that you're another year older?

JOHN

Yes, Eve. It means something.

EVE

I know it used to, but I'm not so sure anymore.

JOHN

I know where I was supposed to be. I couldn't come.

EVE

You haven't missed a Remembrance Day service in 30 years. What was it that was so pressing that you couldn't come today? People don't even ask me about you anymore. No one said a word. They just looked understanding.

JOHN

Well bless them. I'm glad they understand.

(Pause.)

EVE

Well, whatever it is, it's sure taken the wind out of your sails. It's not like you to be so meek and mild.

JOHN

But then it's not like me to miss the service either.

EVE

While we're at it maybe you can tell me why the radio's out here.

JOHN

I moved it out this morning.

EVE

I see that.

JOHN

You want some pop?

EVE

No, I don't want pop.

JOHN

You sure? It's warm, just the way you like it.

EVE

Is that why you didn't come? Because you were moving the radio?

JOHN

I meant to go. I even dragged out the iron and pressed the moth-balls out of the old serge Legion pants.

EVE

I tried to phone you.

JOHN

I was all dressed by 10:30. I even took a jackknife to my round the clock shadow so no one would think I'd been on a binge.

EVE

Mrs. Pederson was at the service. She took it upon herself to tell me that you slept out here last night.

JOHN

I've been sleeping out here for a week.

EVE

John, it's almost winter. There'll be snow on the ground.

JOHN

It's almost winter and I'm almost finished.

EVE

Well, if I'd know things were this serious I might have arranged for them to bring the cenotaph over to your backyard.

JOHN

Eve, I didn't go to the service because I had a feeling something more important might happen if I stayed here.

EVE

And?

JOHN

I went to the airport.

(Pause.)

EVE

Well, I guess you're still alive. You said you were going to do this on your birthday and for once you were true to your word...

JOHN

I didn't go up in an airplane, if that's what you mean. I'm beginning to wonder about myself. Went all the way out to the airport and didn't fly. Got Boxer to drag the noisebox out here and I haven't turned it on yet...

EVE

He was out prowling before I even got up. I think that interview was quite a shock to his system.

JOHN
I think you're probably right about that.

EVE
Did he talk to you about it?

JOHN
He went to the airport with me.

EVE
Did he, now?

JOHN
Yes.

EVE
Do you know where he is now?

JOHN
That might be him just overhead there...

EVE
In an airplane?

JOHN
I hope so...

EVE
John, what are you up to?

JOHN
I'm not up to anything anymore.

EVE
Why did you take him out there? Why did you leave him out there?

JOHN
He'll find his way home. I couldn't stay.

EVE
This is quite a day, isn't it? You couldn't come to the service.
You couldn't stay at the airport.

JOHN
I went out there because I thought I was going to get into an
airplane and take off.

EVE
Well, thank God you didn't.

JOHN

And thank God I didn't take Boxer up? No, Eve. You must know me better than that. I wouldn't have done that. That's only a trick for doubting middle-aged business men. For self-satisfied George. I took Boxer out there because I wanted a witness. I took him out there because I needed him and he...needed to go out there.

EVE

So you didn't...I'm glad you changed your mind.

JOHN

I didn't really change my mind, Eve. I must have changed my mind a long time ago.

(Long pause.)

EVE

You mean you're not going to fly?

JOHN

No, Eve. I guess that's why I missed the service.

(Pause.)

All the way there...to the airport...I could hardly keep my eyes on the road I was so busy looking up the sky tracing my route. Looking forward to having the bottom drop out of my stomach on a fast climb. To get all the houses and the churches and the barns in their proper perspective. It's such a clear day, Eve. Such a perfect day...for anything.

I got there, got out of the car and all of a sudden I wanted to press my steps into the asphalt so that a breeze didn't catch me and whisk me away...Watching my step. Keeping close to the ground. I was already running for cover. Running from the noise, mostly. I don't know what Boxer thought. I don't know if he noticed. I sent him off to talk to Ernie. I walked myself over to a little plane that looked quiet. To touch it...like you would a car or a thoroughbred. It was a shock to touch the metal, Eve. Hot metal winking and flashing in the sun. Like it was daring me to touch it. It could smell the fear in my hands like a smart horse. Jesus, Eve...I felt like a tourist. Taking pictures of the natives and they'd rather spit on you than smile. And the noise. Deafening. Engine noise. It sounded like screams. Great, flapping, screeching birds circling over the prey. I...I don't know how I ever did that, Eve. I don't know how I ever climbed into the belly and choked those suckers into the sky.

(Pause.)

JOHN (cont'd.)

All these years. All these years. Selling life insurance to people who thought they'd never die. Burning holes in my old grey suit and hightailing it in the Buick. All the time not caring if they lived for ever or if I sold a five cent policy. I was meant to be somewhere else. I was meant to do other things. I could sit on the porch and think about my real vocation. Provocation... evocation.

(Pause.)

I couldn't have got into a plane if I had wanted to. And I didn't. Didn't want to. That's what I had to find out. That's why I didn't come to the service. I don't know what I wanted to do all these years. But it wasn't flying.

EVE

Are you alright?

JOHN

It's been a damn good dream. Just because it doesn't work out in truth doesn't mean it can't be a damn fine notion. Every farmer plowing his field must look up and think..."By God but there's a cool breeze up there." A young clerk coming off her shift must get dizzy sometimes staring up wondering where the jets all go. Everybody gets tired of scuffing the polish off the earth.

(Pause.)

Going out there today was like...an end to all impossible things. I thought that's what all these old tattered visions were adding up to but it's not. It's something else. Something else.

(JOHN, very weary, goes and sits in his work area. He stares at his work.)

EVE

I've been so worried about Boxer.

JOHN

He waved at me that he was going up with Ernie. I couldn't even stand to watch him take off.

EVE

I've been so worried that he would get caught up with your flying. He admires you so much, too much sometimes. I was afraid he would get wound up in your flying business.

JOHN

I shouldn't have taken him out there, Eve.

EVE

It's alright.

JOHN

No, no it's not, Eve.

EVE

It's alright. He's set in what he's going to do.

JOHN

Eve...

(Pause.)

I shouldn't have taken him out there. There's going to be hell to pay.

EVE

Why?

(BOXER enters, running.)

BOXER

Hello! Hello!

(BOXER stops short when he sees
EVE.)

Hi, mom.

EVE

Hello, Boxer. How was your plane ride?

BOXER

How did you know?

EVE

Well, I've got the instigator right here.

JOHN

She tortured me, Boxer. I had to tell her.

BOXER

Had to tell her what?

JOHN

Where you were.

BOXER

What the hell happened to you?

JOHN (offhand)

I got cold feet. Did you have fun?

BOXER

I guess you could call it that. I had to hitchhike back from the airport. Why did you leave?

JOHN

I had to come back and catch hell from my sister.

EVE

Ha! I hardly said boo and you know it.

JOHN

You never even wished me Happy Birthday.

BOXER

I offered to sing it to you.

EVE

You're right...I didn't.

(EVE goes to JOHN and kisses him on the cheek.)

And to add insult to injury I haven't even made your cake yet.

JOHN

I'll be wanting hats and party favours, too.

EVE

Yes, sir. Can I count on you being home later, Boxer?

BOXER

Yep.

EVE

I'll be going now...so all hell can break loose while I'm making your cake. See you later.

JOHN

Bye, Eve.

BOXER

Bye, Mom.

(BOXER begins pacing around the area.)

You didn't tell her.

JOHN

About the interview? I thought you'd better do that. Besides, I was already in the line of fire because I didn't go to the service.

BOXER

Oh, she's really going to love us now.

JOHN

Whoa! Speak for yourself, Boxer.

BOXER

I wish you hadn't left. I...

JOHN

You better sit down. You look like you're going to overbalance.

BOXER

Yeah, okay. I'm out at the airport, right?

JOHN

With your Uncle John.

BOXER

Right...no, now listen. I'm just telling you how it happened. Anyway. That Ernie's a hell of a guy.

JOHN

Got it.

BOXER

Do you want to hear this or not?

JOHN

I'm not sure I do...but go ahead.

BOXER

Okay. There we are. We're in the plane. We must have gone...hell we must have covered the whole county in about five minutes. He didn't say anything. I didn't say anything. No, wait. All he says is..."So you're John's nephew." I said I was. He nodded his head and that was it. Didn't say another word for...ages. Honestly. Just sat there chewing his lip and looking like he didn't want to be interrupted. He took a couple of real good dives, too. I thought we were going to take the top off of a couple of farmhouses. It was kind of like he was testing me to see if I puked or anything.

JOHN

And did you?

BOXER

No, thank God. That's the last time I ever have pop before I go up in a plane, though. Anyway. He takes a couple of real good dives, circles and then it looked like we were heading back. I was kind of disappointed. He was treating me like a visitor at a dude ranch.

(Pause.)

Then...we got to talking. He was asking what I do and what my plans are. And I was asking him questions. About flying. Did you know that that's one of the best commercial airports around? A lot of guys go there to do their training. He was telling me all about it. Like...what a commercial pilot has to do to train and...

JOHN

He has to throw up.

BOXER

We talked about you, too. He sounds like he really admires you for taking up flying again. He said he was too young to be in the war but he remembers it pretty well.

JOHN

Like hell he does.

BOXER

Anyway...he kind of made me an offer. He said they need some help out there, someone to do joe-jobs. If I wanted to do it, I could work my way into taking lessons.

(Pause.)

Well, what do you think?

JOHN

That's something, alright. Picasso one day and Billy Bishop the next.

BOXER

Ernie said the three of us can go flying. I'll take lessons, you can brush up and Ernie'll be there to baby us along until we can go by ourselves...the two of us. Eventually we'll be on our own. We can wave to each other.

JOHN

Sure. You up there and me down here. I'm building a monument, remember?

BOXER

What do you think?

JOHN

You haven't been listening to a word I'm saying.

BOXER

I'm excited, I guess.

JOHN

You don't sound excited to me, Boxer. You sound frantic.

BOXER

I'm just trying to tell you how it happened, that's all.

JOHN

So you're going to be a commercial pilot?

BOXER

Yeah, sure.

JOHN

Did the sky open up so you could shake hands with God? Or maybe you hit 3,000 feet and started to speak in tongues.

BOXER

What's the matter?

JOHN

I'm saying that a few encouraging words from an ice cream salesman would have had you peddling dairy products if they hit you up today. I'm saying that you're open for suggestions.

BOXER

What's the matter with you? You sound mad.

JOHN

Last week this time you were set on having your picture taken for the local newspaper. Local boy makes good. Now it's local boy takes off.

BOXER

Aren't you happy? Aren't you happy that I set everything up for us? Or maybe you weren't ready yet? Is that it?

JOHN

There's nothing to get ready for.

BOXER

You going to fly.

JOHN

I don't want to fly.

(Pause.)

BOXER
What?

JOHN
I don't want to fly.

BOXER
What are you talking about? That's all you've ever wanted. Of course you want to.

JOHN
How would you know what I've ever wanted if I don't know myself?

BOXER
You couldn't fly before because...you had responsibilities.

JOHN
Responsibilities to what? To who?

BOXER
Aunt Joyce and...

JOHN
Come on, Boxer. You can do better than that.

BOXER
You were born about 30 years too early. All the things you wanted to do...you couldn't do them then.

JOHN
Why not, Boxer?

BOXER
Things were different then!

JOHN
Or maybe I was always running away from failure? Or always running away from success. Which one sounds better? Or maybe I was just running away. Running away from decisions. Running away from your mother.

BOXER (almost crying with frustration)
You had to go to war!

JOHN
And it's a damn good thing, too. Or I don't know what would have happened.

BOXER
I don't know what you're talking about!

JOHN

And I don't want you to know either!

BOXER

What do you want me to do?!

JOHN

I want you to do what you want to do!

BOXER

I want to fly with you.

JOHN

I changed my mind, Boxer. I had a change in heart.

BOXER

How could you change your mind about something like that?

JOHN

I made a mistake. An error. A mistake.

BOXER

That's some mistake to make.

JOHN

It's some mistake, yes. And I don't want you to make the same one.

BOXER

Where the hell do you get off handing out advice? Warning me about mistakes. You're just scared.

JOHN

Alright, I'm scared.

BOXER

No you're not, dammit! Jesus -- this is like kicking in a damn sandcastle or something.

JOHN

Who built the sandcastle?

BOXER

Stop it! Stop throwing it back at me like you're some kind of wise man on the fucking mountain!

JOHN

I am not wise, Boxer, and I'm right here, bolted to the ground.

(Long pause.)

BOXER

I have always looked up to you. Since I was little. You always had the answers. Always...I knew you were never going to get rich being smart. I knew you were never going to have a chance to make people see things your way. But I thought I saw things your way. Even when all this other shit started to happen...I thought you knew what you were doing.

JOHN

And I don't.

BOXER

No. No you don't. Maybe you don't. You wanna know why I didn't go to that interview? You want to know? Because of you. Because I didn't want you to be alone. I didn't want you to be alone out here or up there or anywhere. I wanted to be with you.

(Pause.)

And you couldn't even spend the time to come with me and make sure I went. And I wonder why. Was it because you didn't want to see me bugger up? Or because you didn't want to see me succeed? Or because you couldn't leave the woodpile in the old back yard here?

JOHN

I'm sorry, Boxer...

BOXER

Don't be sorry, John. That's not like you. Don't admit you were wrong. Don't admit that you don't know. I don't think you do know. I don't think you know what you're doing back here. I don't think you...

JOHN

No, no I don't.

BOXER

You fuck-up! You eternal ever-lasting fuck-up!

(BOXER stops, horrified. Long pause.
JOHN turns his back on BOXER, picks
up a tool.)

JOHN

I think you should go ahead with this pilot idea, Boxer. It sounds like a fine idea if that's what you want. Or phone this guy at the art school and tell him you had car trouble. Tell him you'll come back and see him. You're first rate, Boxer. You'd make a first rate anything. Doctor, lawyer, trucker, acrobat, pilot. You can do anything in the world you want. I could have done anything.

JOHN (cont'd.)

Maybe almost anything you can. But I decided not to. I decided to think about it all my life instead. Sometimes thinking about it is almost as good as doing it.

(BOXER stares at JOHN's back for a while. His face slowly hardens.)

BOXER

Hell no. I think I'll take that job at the gas plant. Or as a store clerk. Or dusting hymnbooks. That way...that way I can have all that spare time to just think about art school.

(BOXER turns away from JOHN and exits. JOHN turns and watches him leave. Long pause. With great weariness and pain JOHN turns and surveys his work area.)

JOHN (softly)

Boxer...Boxer...

(JOHN picks up a piece of finished wood and takes it to the clearing. He kneels on the ground and secures it in place. JOHN steps back from the area and stares at the arrangement. He goes to the wood and touches it, lovingly. He picks up another piece of wood and takes it to the clearing. He begins to erect it and then stops. He draws back from the area and gently lays the wood aside. Lights fade up slowly on YOUNG EVE in memory area. She speaks as though conversing with YOUNG JOHN. JOHN watches.)

YOUNG EVE (laughing)

Don't you remember, John? Last night? You don't remember?

(Pause.)

It was long after midnight...maybe I imagined it. At least I thought I imagined it and then I found your sketchbook in my room. I guess you were sleep-walking...or dream-talking. I don't know. You came to my room and you knocked on the door. I almost didn't open it... I was dreaming about a long hallway with doors opening and people knocking and...I let you in and you handed me your sketchbook. I was half asleep myself and I didn't know what you wanted. You said "Look at it, look at it...tell me what it is." It was...a child's drawing...crude and simple. I laughed. You were...angry. You said...you'd drawn it in your sleep, you woke up with a pencil in

YOUNG EVE (cont'd.)

your hand. You didn't know why you'd started it and you didn't know what it was. Your fingers were outlining and shading all on their own. You said -- "I have to do it, you know." I said... "I know." I didn't know what else to say. I was so tired and your face was so white and strange in the moonlight. I said... "I'm tired." And you leaned over and you kissed me. You looked at me so funny like you'd just realized who I was. And then you said..."We might as well tie stones around our necks." And then you turned and walked out. I called after you but I didn't want to wake anyone. Maybe I didn't want to wake you. The strangest thing..."I have to do it, you know." And you pushed that picture at me. A child's drawing. A dream picture.

(Pause.)

Don't you remember, John?

(Lights fade on YOUNG EVE laughing lightly and leaving the memory area. JOHN stares at YOUNG EVE as she disappears. JOHN turns to his work. He picks up a piece of wood and then draws back from it, startled.)

JOHN

Sometimes...sometimes the damn wood is warm...when there's no sun out.

(Pause.)

No sandpaper been used on you for days.
Warm and breathing or warm and bleeding?
One of these days I'll wake up and there'll be a leaf dangling from around your neck.
This morning I turned over and throw that old blanket off.
I saw a flash of green against the bark.

(Pause.)

And then it wasn't there. Laid my hand on the wood and it was warm. Lukewarm.
Warm like someone had been holding you under their coat instead of leaving you out to feel the frost.

(Pause.)

Crazy. Crazy old son of a bitch.

(JOHN sits down and slowly takes the letter from his pocket and begins to read. He is interrupted by EVE.)

EVE

What did you do to Boxer?

JOHN

Hello, Eve.

EVE

I didn't come to pass the time of day, John. What did you say to him?

JOHN

He'll be alright.

EVE

I don't care how you think he'll be. He says he's not going to art school. He says he doesn't know what he wants. He looks like he's been kicked.

JOHN

I didn't tell him anything that wasn't true.

EVE

And that's supposed to be comforting?

JOHN

Sometimes you have to grow up so fast it kind of takes your breath away.

EVE

I don't want any quaint little drops of wisdom...

JOHN

For God's sake, Eve, What do you think I said to him? Do you think I told him to run away from home? Or that you're not his real mother or there's no God or no mayor...the Catholic Church is in ruins or Canadian winters are hard on tires...

EVE

Stop it! Boxer is not some kind of slave that comes to hear judgment fall from the master's lips. He's my son, John. He's all I've got.

JOHN

He's all I've got too.

EVE

Not anymore, John. Not for a long time.

(Pause.)

JOHN (slow, weary)

He came out to the airport with me. I left him out there. When he came back he was all enthused about flying. I had to tell him I wasn't going to fly. He was counting on me to go along with him. I didn't.

EVE

That's fine, John, but what does it have to do with going to art school?

JOHN

Eve...he...

(EVE notices the letter on the ground.)

EVE

What's that?

JOHN

It's from France.

EVE

What does it say?

JOHN

It's from her sister. That's as far as I got.

EVE

Read it.

JOHN

Not very good English. But it's clear enough. She married in 1946. Had two children. Kept books for her husband's business. And she...continued to sing for her own pleasure. Died in 1978.

EVE

I'm sorry she passed away.

JOHN

She didn't pass away. She's dead.

EVE

I know she is.

(Pause.)

Is that all it says?

JOHN

Yes.

EVE

Then she wasn't another Edith Piaf?

JOHN

No, no she wasn't.

EVE

I'm sorry.

JOHN

Maybe she didn't want to be.

EVE

I don't believe that.

JOHN

Then what happened?

EVE

Maybe she had to marry someone she didn't love because she was tired of waiting. Maybe there was no money and no time. Maybe there was someone she looked up to...to give their blessing to her dreams. And they didn't.

JOHN

I'm almost glad, do you know that? I'm almost relieved that I didn't get a note from her press agent or a heart-warming description of her fulfilling career as a music teacher.

EVE

Are you glad Boxer's not going to art school?

JOHN

Of course I'm not.

EVE

So long as you're surrounded by people who've never done what they want then that makes you feel better.

JOHN

It doesn't make me feel better. It confirms what I've always believed about what's possible and what's not.

(Pause.)

EVE

Boxer's going to art school, John. No matter what you believe.

JOHN

Eve...

EVE

Just because you've spent your whole life with your head bent over a wishing well...

JOHN

Eve, he didn't go to the interview.

EVE (shaken)

What?!

JOHN

He decided that on his own power, Eve. He went to the city, but he didn't go to the...

EVE

And why didn't he go?

JOHN

No one pushed him off the bus...

EVE

I want to know, John.

JOHN

He was scared, I guess.

EVE (grabbing JOHN by the shoulders)

Why didn't he go?

JOHN

Because he wanted to be with me.

(EVE slaps JOHN's face and then immediately draws back.)

EVE

Did you see that in your dreams, too, John? I always thought you wanted to be a father to Boxer but maybe that wasn't it. You wanted him to be like you. A...confirmation of what's possible and impossible.

JOHN

Eve...

EVE

And where do I fit in to your dreams? Wife of George, mother of Boxer, sister to the creative urges of John?

JOHN

Boxer is disappointed in me.

EVE

Why should he be disappointed? You've always had your dreams at your fingertips. Even if they weren't real you managed to carry them around in your back pocket for 30 years. Or this.

(Indicating the sculpture.)

Another fancy to thrash through, build and nail together. We can all hold our breath to see what you come up with.

JOHN

This is not a fancy. It is a compulsion.

EVE

And you always give in to your compulsions, don't you?

JOHN

No, Eve. No I don't. Why do you think I ran away to fly? Why do you think I went to war?

EVE

Why do you think I waited for you? Why do you think I'm always waiting for you?

(Pause.)

I am not just your mother and your wife and your sister all rolled up into a pair of outstretched arms. I have had compulsions. I have had my dreams as well as you. I had my day in Paris. Just like you.

JOHN

Eve...

EVE

But I had obligations to the people I loved. And the people that loved me. Did you ever feel that way? Maybe you didn't.

(EVE prepares to leave. Long pause.)

I will try to talk to Boxer. And leave you to your family of dead trees.

(EVE exits. JOHN looks after EVE.
Long pause.)

JOHN (very softly)

Nora...

(Pause.)

JOHN

Inevitable. In-eve-able.

(JOHN turns to his sculpture. During the next section the lights should dim gradually to indicate approaching evening. The pieces of wood are completely carved and smooth, lying to one side ready to be erected in the space cleared for them. JOHN works slowly and deliberately. The pieces are secured with a good deal of hammering and shifting. As JOHN decides where they should go they are handled gently, lovingly.)

Family of dead trees.

(Pause.)

Wouldn't it be just like you to plant a bunch of dead trees.

(Pause.)

In the cold ground. A family of sweet dead weeping wood. In November. Before the frost.

(Pause.)

When it's too goddamn late for them to grow.
You'll have to be recycled...replanted...
Late frost, long winter. But we'll still be here in the spring.

(JOHN stops. Considers woods for a moment and then continues. Works in silence. JOHN secures the last piece in place. The grouping of trees has formed a family of sorts. There are three figures, tall in the middle, next smallest to one side and smallest on the other side. The statue, or sculpture, is free standing although the pieces seem to depend on each other for support. The effect is quite striking. The figures are tall and gaunt. They have the quality of both a war memorial and a Munch painting.

JOHN continues working on the sculpture, securing the pieces at the base. He does not convey a sense of completion. He begins to hum softly to himself as he continues to work. Lights fade to black.

THE END

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APPENDIX A:

THE WORKSHOP PROCESS

NORA AT DAYBREAK

Thesis Workshop
Northern Light Theatre
May 11-17, 1982

JOHN.....WENDELL SMITH
EVE.....ELYN ROSS GIBSON
BOXER, YOUNG JOHN.....GRANT CARMICHAEL
YOUNG EVE.....CHERYL HEIKEL

Dramaturge.....Dave Billington
Director.....Brian Deedrick
Playwright.....Conni Massing

I approached the workshop of Nora at Daybreak with a good deal of trepidation. I had been involved with rewrites in conjunction with a production, but I had not yet participated in a formal workshop. In these previous experiences, the impetus for accomplishing rewrites was provided by a production date deadline. I was intimidated by both the length and format of the thesis workshop, and more than a little skeptical about its potential. In the final analysis, I must say that my fears were unjustified; the workshop was an excellent experience and most beneficial. In an attempt to describe the process, I have given equal time to both the design and the actual process of the workshop. I have done this because I feel that the format and structure of the week contributed as much to the success of the workshop as the process itself.

Two approaches could be taken to the workshop process. The first would involve intense discussion and rehearsal of the play, working toward a performance level at the staged reading. This method would have entailed limited rewrites, and allowed the opportunity to see detailed character work done by the actors. The writer could then leave the process with a clear idea of the play's shape and form and make changes following the workshop. The alternative approach involved extensive rewrites during the course of the workshop, with far less emphasis placed on the "performance" of the staged reading. After discussing the potential benefits and disadvantages of both styles, we decided on the latter approach. My reasons for this choice were two-fold. I wanted to do as many

rewrites as possible because I felt that the script was not strong enough to bear a week's scrutiny in its existing state. Secondly, I wanted the benefit of the actors' skills in expediting this process.

The staged reading, although important as a culmination of the week's work, was not to be the focal point of the workshop. This, in turn, influenced the director's choice of actors. Their suitability for the role was far less important than their ability to participate in the workshop in an intelligent and constructive manner.

The function and purpose of actors, dramaturge, director and playwright was another carefully discussed aspect of the workshop design. My personal feeling regarding actors is that they can be both invaluable and troublesome in a workshop situation. The experience of watching an actor apply his skills to a new script yields insights never gained from discussion or reading. On the other hand, I do not believe that actors necessarily have a clear vision of the play as a whole. I am troubled when actors are allowed to manipulate the play beyond the realm of their own character. Thus, it was a highly dangerous and difficult role that the actors assumed in this process. They were given free rein to participate in every aspect of the discussion, insofar as the director allowed and I could accept. I was extremely fortunate in that they exercised both their acting skills and critical judgement in a sensitive way throughout the week. I welcomed their suggestions and learned a great deal from their interpretation of the roles.

The director provided yet another insight into the process and progress of the play. His key function, however, was in guiding the discussions and devising a structure for the daily work. Through his use of scene work, character analysis and table discussion, he helped me to see the play in many different ways. He cleared the occasional stalemate, energised the discovery process and played the roles of arbitrator, mediator and advisor. We worked together to determine the form and structure of the week, and analysed the proceedings of each day in order to plan the next.

The dramaturge was in many ways the most interesting participant in the workshop process. While Dave Billington is an active entertainment critic and commentator, he had no concept as to the role of dramaturge, and had never participated in a workshop before. In our explanation to him of his function, we clarified the role for ourselves as well. He became the objective "eye", and the "in-house critic". He was also the one person sufficiently detached from the process to remind us constantly of our objectives and of the core of the play. His function was to watch, listen and to "police" the operation when he felt that the conclusions or suggestions were inconsistent with the play's meaning. Mr. Billington was fond of referring to this as "dropping a rock in the middle of the pond".

Finally we came to my own function in the workshop. I felt compelled to absorb as much as possible from each day's discussion; to be as truthful as possible in an analysis of its worth; and as effective as possible in executing the resultant changes.

The scheduling of the days was reasonable consistent. Regular rehearsal hours were spent with actors; dramaturgical discussions took place at lunchbreaks and after the day's work. The public reading was scheduled for the evening of the final day and was to be performed with minimal rehearsal props and no set.

The workshop process itself was both exhilarating and exhausting. The experience of having so many voices and minds applied to the script was very exciting. My attempt to capture their suggestions and my ideas in the rewrites was an almost overwhelming task. The script which I brought into the workshop was at the same time skeletal and overburdened. The entire draft was only sixty pages long and the character development, save for John, was minimal. On the other hand, the script was laden with images, motifs and divergent themes. The element most sorely lacking, however, was a strong line of action. In its rough state the play was more akin to a choral poem than to a dramatic work. These were the problems I discovered and attempted to address during the workshop.

The first session of the workshop was spent with two readings of the complete play, followed by a full day of general discussion. The nature and placement of the memory scenes generated a good deal of comment and criticism. The strengths, weaknesses and inconsistencies of the characters were analysed by the actors and discussed by all. The experience of hearing the play in its entirety confirmed my belief that I should attempt to rewrite the play from the beginning.

The following three days were spent working with the first act. During this time I completely rewrote the first act, with the exception of one scene. These rewrites effected a number of positive changes in the script. The characters of Eve and Boxer were deepened and John's motivation for his actions was clarified. The memory scenes became more clearly related to the action in the present and the dramatic line in the first half of the act was strengthened considerable. These first days were the most productive of the workshop. Each day began with the reading of the new material which was subsequently discussed and rehearsed. By the end of the fourth day, however, we decided that we should attempt to spend proportionate time on the second act.

It was at this point that I realized that the first act rewrites had affected a number of elements in the second act which had not previously been problematic. Unfortunately, there was not enough workshop time left to completely rewrite the second act. I had to decide which scenes were most crucial and how best to rework them in the remaining two days. I worked primarily with the middle of the second act and the end of the play. These were, however, cosmetic changes and some major problems were not dealt with in the last days of the workshop. As a result, the second act was not as effective as it might have been. More specifically, the character relationships remain largely unresolved at the end of the play. The line of action, although bolstered by the rewrites, tends to waiver at different points in the play. Thematically, the play is still ambivalent. There are two or three major ideas

competing for central focus.

My general assessment of the workshop's success was that it improved the play immeasurably. I was amazed and pleased at the quantity and quality I was able to produce in the workshop week. Not all of the problems with the play had been clearly addressed by the end of the week and, as always, new problems were created by the changes. I do feel, however, that the play is firmly rooted in strong characters and rich images, and I hope that this will provide a solid basis for further development.

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